



EDITORIAL

Does Choral Art Sit on its Rear End?

Philosopher Arthur C. Danto (2003) frames a recurring question in a vivid way. He ponders whether art “does something more than sit on its ass” (p. 133).

Danto, of course, refers to art defined as autonomous objects or works. According to formalist, aesthetic philosophies, such works, be they paintings, sculptures, symphonies, or motets, purportedly exist for their own sake. They serve no function other than evocation of a disinterested aesthetic pleasure occasioned by contemplation of their inherent form and expressive properties.

This idea that meaning resides autonomously within a musical work continues to inform some instrumental music or “music alone” contexts. However, two, interrelated considerations suggest this concept may be problematic as a primary hermeneutic principle for thinking about choral music.

First, choral music making typically involves lyrics. The extent to which words shed ordinary, referential meanings when sung in compositions designated as works of art remains a thorny question.

Indeed, conceptual difficulties posed by the presence of lyrics prompt some formalist philosophers to wonder if vocal music should count as “music” at all. Eduard Hanslick (1891/1986), for example, suggests “one will always have to grant the concept of ‘music’ does not apply strictly to a piece of music composed to a verbal text” (pp. 9-10). Peter Kivy (2002) acknowledges, “most of the music in the world is now, and always has been, music sung to words” (p. 25). Yet he confesses this textured music appears fundamentally incompatible with

conceptual frameworks, including his own, which approach music from some formalist, autonomous perspective. “Music with words,” he says, “is quite another matter” (p. 99).

Secondly, choral singers directly employ their neurobiological bodyminds as musical instruments. Succinctly put, human voices are living, not dead, media. Singers, unlike orchestra players, cannot pack their instruments into storage cases and walk away from them.

Human beings, moreover, have but one larynx. This organ functions in both singing and speaking. Even when used for musical purposes, the larynx remains embodied, that is, it does not function in isolation from the rest of the human bodymind.

When we sing, for instance, the larynx continues, simultaneously, to protect the respiratory tract, admit air to and from the trachea, help regulate temperature and humidity in the lungs, and otherwise carry out its primary task of human survival. It also maintains constant interface with other human organs and with all manner of bodymind schemata, including integrated routines and behaviors learned from previous experiences that inform both self- and social-identities.

It may require some suspension of belief in what we know about human physiology, neurobiology, and communication to suggest (a) the ongoing, integrated tasks performed by human larynges and (b) everyday, referential meanings of words somehow become extraneous, even irrelevant, when we sing a composition deemed to be an autonomous work of art. Yet some aesthetic philosophies of music advance just such claims when they either gloss

over the embodied nature of human voices or view lyrics as non-artistic, extra-musical phenomena “always transformed and transcended by the internal artistic form” of a musical work (Reimer, 1989, p. 27).

Data from two studies in this issue of *IJRCS* address the conceptual possibility that choral art need not necessarily sit on its rear end as an autonomous, works-centered enterprise. In an historical investigation, Mary L. Cohen examines a collaborative effort on behalf of prison-based choirs by maestros Robert Shaw (1916-1999) and Elvera Voth (1923 -). Both Voth and Shaw, she finds, embodied a passionate conviction that choral singing, including the singing of masterworks, could transform lives as an instrument of social justice, healing, and empowerment.

Marvin E. Latimer, Jr., offers a mixed methods investigation of identity acquisition in a gay men’s chorus. He finds participants in his study largely view choral singing, not primarily in terms of disinterested aesthetic experience, but rather as an agent for vocally and socially constructed identities.

Perusal of the *Proquest Dissertations and Theses (PQDT)* database suggests graduate students in music degree programs may have spilt more dissertation and thesis ink to date on investigation of vocal music scores than on any other variable associated with singing. Such compositions play an obvious role in many choral singing contexts. Choirs sing them, conductors analyze and interpret them, publishers market them, and listeners attend to them. Certainly, rigorous analyses of vocal music scores per se are both appropriate and helpful.

Rehearsal and performance of these scores, however, entail human factors that also merit investigation. In this issue of *IJRCS*, a study of self-reported voice use by high school singers at a summer choral music camp raises matters relative to young choral singers engaged in several hours of rehearsing choral music scores each day. Students report a significant decline in self-assessed aspects of vocal health as measured by beginning and end of week responses to voice health indicator statements. Yet, at the same time, these adolescent singers believe they are taking good care of their voices.

In recent years, computer software programs providing real-time displays of sound spectra have captured the interest of a growing number of studio voice teachers. Such software supplements teacher verbalizations with visual feedback to students as they sing in one-on-one instructional contexts. Might such a tool have applications in choral singing rehearsals as well?

In a feasibility study, John Nix, Gary Mabry, and Amy Mathews-Mutwill take a first step toward investigating this possibility by asking a very basic question: How would choral singers perceive the presence in their rehearsals of an ongoing visual display large enough for everyone to see? The authors properly caution much work remains to be done to determine whether, to what degree, and under which circumstances such spectral displays can accurately depict the various complexities and confounding variables attendant to choral sound, as opposed to solo sound. Nonetheless, primary findings that choral singers in this particular study perceive these displays as both non-intrusive upon the rehearsal process and potentially beneficial to their learning addresses a necessary step in ascertaining the pedagogical viability of displaying spectra in choral rehearsals. Succinctly put, the study suggests, “If we can build it, they will come.”

Recent conversations among members of our editorial board focused on potential ways to encourage data-based research in choral singing among those persons who occupy the “front lines” of our profession: choir conductor-teachers and choral singers. Accordingly, this issue of *IJRCS* inaugurates an anticipated series of tutorial articles addressing various aspects of researching choral singing phenomena. Richard J. Morris begins the series with some reflections and advice on “Planning and Recording of Acoustic Research of Choral Singing.”

Commencing with the 2009 volume, already in preparation, *IJRCS* will publish individual studies seriatim as soon as they pass the peer review process and undergo final editing. This procedure will enhance our mission by disseminating research in a more timely fashion than the practice of publishing only full issues of the journal. Some slight changes in the appearance and formatting of the journal will accompany this new policy.

We thank readers for their patience and support during this journal's hiatus. *IJRC* continues to be a labor of love. Its staff and editorial board receive neither compensation nor release time from their many other professional duties. Moreover, in an age of increasingly expensive journals and for-profit electronic access to knowledge managed by publishing

conglomerates, we continue to believe this journal should remain a free, easily accessible resource for peer-reviewed research of high quality. Balancing these factors can sometimes be difficult. Yet, you have convinced us it is well worth the effort. We're back. And we're here to stay.

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